

FIRST TIME AFTER

by

Dorothy Canfield Fisher

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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For about a year Dorothy Canfield directed the printing of a magazine for the war-blind at the Lighthouse in Paris. This poignant story of a blind French soldier has back of it her own experience of work among the war blind.

Illustrated by George Wright

THE little newspaper in his home town put the matter thus, "Our young fellow-citizen, Louis Vassard, has returned from the hospital to his home. He received a bad head-wound in the battle of Verdun and unfortunately has lost his eyesight."

Of course the family meant to keep from him this casual method of announcing the end of his world, as they meant to keep everything from the newly blinded man, but he overheard the item being read aloud in the kitchen, and took a savage pleasure in its curt brevity. He liked it better, he told himself disdainfully, than the "sympathy" which had surrounded him since his return home. He cast about for an adjective hateful enough, and found it—"sniveling sympathy," that was the word. He rejoiced in its ugliness; all his old sensitive responsiveness curdled into rage.

The hospital had been hell, nothing less, intolerable physical agony constantly renewed; and of course home, where he was petted and made much of and treated like a sick child, home was not hell; but sickened and embittered, resenting with a silent ferocity the commiseration of those about him, he felt sometimes that hell was the better place of the two.

The most galling of all his new humiliations was that he was never allowed to be alone. His ears, sharpened like all his other senses by the loss of his sight, heard the silly whispering voices at the door. "I can't stay any longer," whispered his aunt, who, for an hour, had been stupefying him with her dreary gabble. "Come, it's your turn," and he heard the dragging step of his old cousin advancing with a stifled sigh to do his duty by their martyred hero. Or, it was the light, irregular step of his little sister, irritated at being forced to do what would have been a pleasure if she had been left free.

He dared not protest against this as hotly as he felt, because, his self-control hanging by a thread, he knew that if he let himself go at any point, he would be lost, would be raving and shrieking to be killed like the man in

the bed next him at the hospital. He swallowed down his rage and his humiliation and only said coldly, "You don't need to mount guard on me like that, all the time. I'm blind, I know, but I'm not an imbecile—yet!" He shocked them by his brutal outspoken use of the word, and they drove him frantic by beating about the bush to avoid it, always saying to others, that he "had had a bad head-wound and his eyes were affected."

He said once sternly, "Why should you think I'm ashamed to hear the word? You don't suppose it's any doings of mine, being blind!"

But no matter how brusquely or roughly he spoke, he could never anger them. He felt often and often that if only he could hurt them, startle them into irritability, he would be relieved. But they never varied from the condescending amiability one shows to children and sick people. He sickened and shivered at the thought of the glances of pitying comprehension with which they probably accompanied those never-varying soft answers.

And always they stayed with him. Even when for a few moments they pretended to go away and leave him, he heard the breathing and the imperceptible stirrings of some one left on guard. Or he imagined that he heard them, and scorned to grope his way to see. Instead he sat motionless, his mask of pride grimmer and harder than ever.

Next after their always being there, he hated their efforts to cheer him up. That had been the phrase of the doctor at the hospital, when they went there to take him away, "Now he must be cheered up. He mustn't be left to brood. He needs cheerful company about him." Of course there was his mother—and he was so young that only a few years of intense growth separated him from the time when he ran to her for consolation. Certainly his mother could not be accused of attempting too much to cheer him up, the poor mother who, try as she might, had not yet mastered herself so that she could command her voice when she looked into the tragic sightless face of her son. Himself poised on the brink

of hysteria, he dreaded more than anything in the world the sound of that break in his mother's voice. Oh, yes, he realized it perfectly, it was not their fault, it was not that they did the wrong things, it was only that he hated everything they did—if they spoke cheerfully or wept, were silent or laughed. He was like a man all one raw sore, to whom every touch is torture.

He often woke up in the morning feeling that he could not go on another day, that he *could* not. Every one about him commented on his remarkable quiet. "He never complains, he talks about all kinds of things, he has the newspaper read to him every morning," they reported to visitors. They did not see the sweat on his forehead as he listened.

ONE day they had taken him out-of-doors, on the bench at the end of the garden. It was his little sister's turn to "be with poor Louis," the little sister who would have been so unconsciously droll and diverting if she could have been natural. He said to her, "Oh, go and play, Celia! Why don't you bring your hoop out here? Or your jumping-rope?"

But the conscientious, sensitive child, drugged by the fumes of self-sacrifice which filled the house, was incapable of being herself. She sat on the bench beside her big brother, holding his hand, talking affectedly, with an artificial vivacity, in as close an imitation as possible of her elders. The man to whom she chattered, winced, shrugged his shoulders and fell into a morose silence.

But Celia, after all, was only eight years old, and at that age, honest human nature is hard to stifle. Over across the road in the meadow was Jacques with his new net, hunting butterflies. And—she stood on tiptoe to see—yes, he seemed to have caught—could it be that blue-and-black variety they hadn't yet found? She darted away, ran back, caught her brother's hand, "Louis, just a minute! I won't be gone but just a minute!" she cried, and was off, her little feet pattering down the path to the road.

Why, he was alone! It was the very



Then three clear whistling notes dropped down to him, a thrush trying his voice wistfully.

first time since— He did not finish the sentence, shrinking away in terror from the word, now that there was no need for bravado.

He stood up wildly. He must get away at once, to find some hidden spot, to be more and yet more alone. He knew that from the house they could not see the bench—oh, he knew every inch of the ground around the house from having played all over it from his childhood. He knew too that on the other side of the hedge there was an open field with a big clump of chestnut-trees, further along, opposite the hole in the hedge where you could scramble through.

He started down the path. It was the first time he had taken a step without having some one rush to lead him. His heart beat fast.

He followed the path, feeling his way with his cane. There was the hole in the hedge. Somehow, he was through, and walking on sod, soft under his feet; no, something round and hard was there. He fumbled, picked it up; a chestnut. He must be near the clump of trees. Alone, he had found the way!

He turned to the left. In the old days there was a little hollow where the brook ran, a little hollow all thickly overgrown with ferns just large enough to hide a boy who was playing robbers. If he could only find that place and lie

down in the ferns again! Scorning to put out his hands to grope, he stepped forward slowly into the black infinity about him. After a few steps, something brushed lightly against his hanging hand. He stooped and felt in his fingers the lace-like grace of a fern-stalk. The sensation brought back to him with shocking vividness all his boyhood, sunflooded, gone forever.

He flung himself down in the midst of the ferns, the breaking-point come at last, beating his forehead on the ground. It was the first time that he could throw aside the racking burden of his stoicism. At last he was alone, entirely alone in the abyss where henceforth he was to pass his days and nights. Dreadful tears ran down from his blind eyes upon the ferns. He was alone at last; he could weep. At last this was not rage; this was black, black sorrow.

NOW they were shed, the tears, the great scalding flood of them had fallen. The man lay on his face in the ferns like a dead body on a battle-field, broken, drained dry of everything, of strength, of stoicism, of suffering, even of bitterness. For the moment there was nothing left—nothing but the consciousness of being alone, empty and alone in the blackness.

And yet was he alone, quite alone? Something in the black gulf stirred and

made a rustle of leaves high over his head. The little sound came clear to his ears. Then three clear whistling notes dropped down to him, a thrush trying his voice wistfully, dreaming of the summer past. The angel-pure perfection of those notes sounded across the black gulf with ineffable radiance. The prostrate man at the foot of the tree, heard them ringing out in the echoing, empty rooms of his heart. They seemed the first sounds he had ever heard, the presage of something new, of everything new. He did not stir, but he held his breath to listen.

The bird did not sing again. And yet there was no silence as he had thought. Listening for the bird's note, he heard the delicate murmur of the leaves, light arpeggios accompanying the singing voice of the little brook, now suddenly quite loud in his ears. He felt the fern-stalks stirring against his cheek and divined their supple submission to the wind. The chestnut was still in his hand, unimaginably smooth polished, flawless. The breeze lifted his hair in a movement gentler than anything human—his blackened house was no longer empty of all things.

Presently his young body wearied of immobility. He found himself on his back, stretched out on the good earth, his arms crossed under his head, his eyes turned toward the sky he would never see again. His muscles

were all relaxed as they had not been for months; every taut nerve was loosened. The wind blew softly among the leaves, across his forehead. On a sudden caprice, the thrush again sent down its three perfect notes, like an enchanted flute.

They ushered him into the moment he had inexpressibly longed for, inexpressibly feared, the moment when he must stop hating and raging, must stop pretending to be hard, when he must at last be honest with himself, must face what there was to face, must say out the word he had never dared to say in his heart, although his proud lips had brought it out so many times, when he must announce to his terrified heart, "I am a blind man. What does it mean to be blind?"

Above his body, infinitely tired, infinitely reposed by his paroxysm of sorrow, his mind soared, imperious, eagle-like, searching. What was the meaning of it? He looked squarely at it like a brave man, and knew that he had the courage to look at it. With an effort of all his being, he began to think; with all his force, with all his will, with all his energy, to think. With the action he felt a stirring of life in all those empty chambers of his being.

The moments passed. The thrush sang once, stirred in the trees, flew to another, sang again, and was not heard.

The blind eyes staring up at the sky saw nothing material, and yet began to see. A dim ray glowed in the blackness.

After a time he said hurriedly to himself, nervously anxious lest he should let the clue out of his hand, "Our senses are not ourselves; we are not our senses, no. They are the instruments of our understanding. To be blind means that I have one less instrument than other men. But a man with a telescope has one more than other men, and is life worthless to them because of that?"

He paused breathless with the effort of the first thought of his own since, since—"And our senses, even the best of them, are like an earthworm's vague intuitions beside scientific instruments, a thermometer, a microscope, a photographic plate. And yet with what they give us, poor, imperfect as it is, we make our life, we make our life."

He took one more poor stumbling step along the path he divined open to him: "A man with understanding, without a telescope, without a microscope can see more than a fool with both instruments." Aloud he said gravely, as though it were a statement of great value: "The use one makes of what one has, that is the formula. That is my formula."

There was a pause, for him luminous.

He told himself quietly, without despair, "And as for understanding, for really seeing what is, aren't we all groping our way in the dark? Am I blinder than before?" It seemed to him that something within him righted itself, balanced, poised. His sickness left him. He knew an instant's certainty. Of what? Of himself? Of life? If so, it was the first he had ever known in all his life. Strange that it should come now, when—

Then all this fell away from him. He thought no more. He lay on the earth now, not like a dead man on a battle-field, but like a child on its mother's knees. He felt the earth take him in her arms, and he closed his eyes, abandoning himself to her embrace.

THE sound of distant voices roused him from his dreaming doze. He turned on his elbow to listen, the old aunt, the old cousin talking together. "Oh, the naughty little girl, off there in the meadow chasing butterflies! How heartless children are! To leave her poor brother all alone, when he needs so to be cheered!"

The blind man lying in the ferns broke out into a laugh, a ringing young laugh, without irony, without bitterness.

It was the first time he had laughed since—since his blindness.

FLANDERS BELLS

By GRACE HAZARD CONKLING

OH IT'S I that would be hearing
The Flanders bells again,
The way they used to murmur
Across the evening plain,
The way they used to jangle
Through rainy dawn or fair,
And laugh the people's laughter
And pray the people's prayer.

The farm-lads done with plowing,
The oxen safe in stall,
The teamsters back from fairing,
The old bells knew them all,
And children ceased their playing
And hearkened on their knees
What Angelus was saying
Above the roadside trees.

*They've melted them for metal,
They've molded them to guns:
Go, bring them home to Flanders,
The patient exiled ones!
When all the guns are captured,
Melt them, melt them down,
And mold them into bells again
For every Flanders town!*

Oh, it's I that would be seeing
The men come home again
Along the Flanders highways
Through sunlight and through rain:
Their voices would be tender,
Their weary eyes be wet,
To hear the great bells crying
What no man could forget.

Evening they knew and morning,
Wedding and funeral,
And songs of little children—
The chimes could sing them all!
And many a woman listened
After her prayer was said,
To hear the bells go flying
Like angels overhead.

*They've melted them for metal,
They've molded them to guns:
Go bring them home to Flanders
The patient exiled ones!
When all the guns are captured
Melt them, melt them down,
And mold them into bells again
For every Flanders town!*



They were pouring down to the moat, an advance rabble of boys and girls, men and women, running in front, all shouting, gesticulating, turning as they ran to look back at where he came.

The DUCHESS *of* SIONA

By Ernest Goodwin

Illustrated by Wladyslaw T. Benda

THE young and beautiful Beatrice is Duchess of Siona, a hill town of fourteenth-century Italy. The Sionese are heavily taxed by the Lord Malatesta, who had conquered the city when Beatrice was but a girl of fifteen. Her memory of that terrible conquest and the slaughter that resulted have made her cold and relentless. She hates all men and refuses to marry, although on his deathbed her father exacted the promise from her to allow any man who came courting her a month's grace before she gave him her answer. The rules she has laid down for her suitors discourage men from trying their luck and after three years no more suitors come to Siona.

But now, if ever, Siona needs a strong man's hand. Malatesta doubles his taxes and demands a levy of men. And there are threats of rebellion among the guilds. Meantime, Guilielmo, Malatesta's son, wanton, cruel, and a coward, sends a messenger to demand the Duchess in marriage. Beatrice is still quivering from her indignant refusal of this proposal, when a lover is announced, the first in a year.

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